

# Lesson in the death camp



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A group of sixth-formers and teachers from Wales saw the dark side of history first-hand

It was an emotionally draining day for Welsh sixth-formers and their teachers. The sun shone, but it could not take away the darkness of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the former Nazi death camp in southern Poland, where one million people, mostly Jews, were exterminated.

It was the first trip to the death camp, the largest under Hitler's dictatorship, organised for Wales's schools by the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) as part of the Lessons from Auschwitz project.

The pupils, most of whom are studying history or RE, were encouraged to question their perceptions of good and evil, the difference between a bystander and perpetrator, and the tough issue of how people allowed the Holocaust to happen.

They did so while witnessing the realities of this chilling episode in world history - suitcases with name labels still on, thousands of shoes, and even human hair that was used to make the uniforms of German soldiers.

For teachers, it was a chance to reflect on the way they taught the haunting period that saw so many innocent men, women and children gassed to death. Most felt lessons had to be handled sensitively, with some of the more shocking details left out - especially when pitched at younger pupils.

It is compulsory for all Polish schoolchildren to visit Auschwitz but Richard Evans, a history teacher at Pembrokeshire College, said he felt the brutality of the death camps possibly called for a gentler approach.

"I think 16 or 17 is about the right age for a young person to visit. It would help if it was at the beginning of the history A-level course," he said.

The politics and origins of the Second World War are part of the key stage 3 curriculum, with children encouraged to relate them to Welsh life and the modern day.

Pupils who choose to study history at GCSE or A-level have the option to study the war in more depth. Those following Welsh exam board the WJEC are encouraged to look at the "spiritual, moral, ethical, social and cultural dimensions" of the Second World War, including the impact on Jewish people.

The Holocaust is not mentioned directly. Students taking A-level look more specifically at Hitler's personal conviction, the circumstances of the war, and the history of the Jews in Europe.

Sarah Courtney, head of history at Bedwas Comprehensive in Caerphilly, felt it could be

"emotionally difficult" to talk about some of the events in the death camp, suggesting instead a "carousel session" in which pupils research the subject themselves.

Joanne Croll, head of history at St Cenydd School in Caerphilly, said it was important that lessons were related to current events in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Anita Parmar, deputy head of education at the HET and a former history teacher, said pupils become ambassadors during the project, and all are encouraged to feed their experiences back to their schools and communities.

Pupils from Bedwas Comprehensive, for example, are planning to use the experience to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day in January.

The HET recently received £1.5 million from the Westminster government. But another Welsh trip will depend partly on funding from the Assembly government.

"When we hear survivors speak, even the most disruptive young people are quiet. You can often hear a pin drop," said Ms Parmar.

## LIFE BEFORE THE WAR

Ninety-eight pupils and teachers travelled to the tiny Polish town of Oswiecim following an early morning flight from Cardiff.

Pupils first visited a synagogue with Rabbi Barry Marcus, who set up the project, to get a feel for Jewish life before the war.

Then they travelled on to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The group was told how, during the Second World War, more than a million Jews, Poles, gypsies and homosexuals were killed, many in the gas chambers.

The day ended with a candlelit procession along the infamous rail-tracks along which people were brought into the camp, and a moving memorial service with prayers and poetry, led by Rabbi Marcus.

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